

Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time: Eat My Flesh, Drink My Blood

Cannibals. Atheists. Atheists and cannibals. Those two charges were made against the Christians in the Roman Empire of the first three centuries AD. First of all, they were charged with being atheists. This seems shocking, particularly when we read how the early Christians were so so spiritual, so devoted to God. How could anyone call them atheists? They were called atheists because they refused to worship the Roman gods. If something went wrong, such as a bad harvest or a defeat in battle, it was obvious to the Romans that some god had been offended by the Christians refusal to worship him or her. This god was taking his vengeance out on everyone, Christians and non-Christians.

As serious as this charge was, even more serious was the charge that the Christians were cannibals. This charge was based on the Christians' own teaching that they ate flesh and drank blood, the Body and Blood of Christ. Today's Gospel reading ends with the Lord saying, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." Next week we will hear the Lord building on this by saying, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood you will not have life within you." "My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." Jesus even says, "the one who feeds on me will have life because of me." The pagans, on hearing about this, made the claim that Christians were cannibals.

We know that Jesus was speaking about a presence that was not a physical presence, but a real presence. My favorite analogous example: an adopted child might not be the physical child of his or her parents, but he or she is really their child. The Christians share in the real presence of the Lord, but not the physical presence in the sense of bone, muscles, etc. But the pagans didn't know this. They did not know exactly what was taking place when Christians gathered for their mysterious rites. They only heard that they ate the Body of Christ and drank His Blood. So they accused Christians of practicing cannibalism.

Obviously, we are not cannibals. But we do eat the Body and drink the blood of the Lord in a mysterious way. From the earliest days of the Church, we have referred to the Eucharist as the Mystery of Faith, an expression of Christ's death, resurrection and second coming. In the Early Church those enquiring about the faith were not introduced into the mysteries until the Church felt that they were spiritually ready to accept the Eucharist. We have a touch of that remaining in those parishes who follow the full and current OCIA rituals and have the catechumens leave Mass after the readings, not being present for the Eucharist until they are ready to join the community.

For all of us, to understand Communion is to take a leap of faith into mystery. We are receiving the real Body and Blood of the Lord. At Mass, the bread and wine are consecrated, not just blessed. They become Jesus in a mystical way, a way beyond our understanding. The Eucharist is infinitely more than a meal of fellowship. It is this, but it is far more than this. The Eucharist is infinitely more than the union of

the community with Christ as its head. It is this, but it is far more than this. When we receive communion, we receive Jesus, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, as we say in the Divine Mercy chaplet. The bread and wine become the Lord and remain the Lord. The consecrated hosts are kept in our tabernacles for us to take to the sick and for us to pray before in adoration. Our non-Catholic brothers and sisters have no reason to do this. They do not have tabernacles because they do not believe that the bread and wine are transformed into the Lord's Body and Blood. Nor do they have priests capable of doing this for the community. Their communion services are radically different than ours. That is the reason why a Catholic cannot leave the Catholic Church without leaving the Eucharist even if they join a faith that has a communion service.

We Catholics are people of mystery. We do not know how, but somehow, we are united to Christ in a mystical way every time we receive communion.

To understand the miracle and mystery of the Eucharist, our starting point must be Jesus. Jesus is Divine, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. He is the Eternal Son of the Father. When we eat His Body and drink His Blood, when we receive communion, He gives us who He is, Eternal Life. Our Founding Fathers, Washington, Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, etc, gave us liberty, but they were not liberty. Abraham Lincoln gave the slaves freedom, but he was not freedom. But Jesus gave the Bread of the Eternal Life because He is the Bread of Life. Jesus was not just a great man. He is Divine. The Bread of Life is Jesus, our Divine Sustenance.

And we take Him into ourselves. When we receive the Eucharist, we are united to Him, to each other and to the whole Body of Christ. It is no wonder that those who wish to destroy the Church begin by attacking the Eucharist. In England of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, France in the Eighteenth Century, Mexico in the Twentieth Century, and throughout the world in the Twenty-first century, wherever radical Islam rears its head, Christianity is attacked by attacking the Eucharist as well as those who can provide the Eucharist for others. Throughout history and continuing to the present day priests are tortured and killed for saying Mass for the people who long for the Bread of Life. The Eucharist is defiled by those who do not realize what they are doing when they trample on consecrated hosts.

You can see the hand of the devil here. In the diabolical battle against God's people, the devil attacks that which binds them to God, the Eucharist. His attacks are not just overt, though. The Father of Lies works subtlety. He tries to convince us that Jesus was a wonderful man, but just that, a man. When Jesus is equated with other great men of history, then the Eucharist has no meaning. It then becomes a pious Catholic practice with no real significance beyond that of holy water. The unbelieving murmur that Catholics are not really receiving the Lord when they go to communion. Some Catholics are swayed by their arguments. And the devil wins a battle in his war on the Kingdom of God.

But the devil loses a battle every time that Mass is celebrated and every time

that people receive the Bread of Life. Every Sunday, and for some of us every day, we enter into the Mystery of the Eucharist. We receive the One who is the Bread of Life.

This is Jesus who unites Himself to Us with His Body and Blood.

This is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Eternal Son of the Father, who humbled Himself to become one of us, to die for us, and then gave the gift of His Life and Death to us in the form of the Blessed Sacrament.

This is Jesus whom we will take into ourselves today when we receive communion.

The people of the Gospel reading murmured. They murmured because they were not open to faith.

We do not murmur.

We proclaim.